

**Abyssal Compassion or Acquiescence to Violence?
Reconfiguring Abelard for a Non-Violent Theory of Atonement**

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Killing, and Being Killed, as Salvific

When the warriors of the First Crusade reached Constantinople, the daughter of Emperor Alexius I described a fusion of imperial violence, self-sacrificing devotion, and atonement theology seen in the priests who accompanied the knights:

[A] Latin Barbarian will at the same time handle sacred objects, fasten a shield to his left arm and grasp a spear in his right. He will communicate the Body and Blood of the Divinity and meanwhile gaze on bloodshed and become himself a “man of blood.”¹

The Eastern Christians were resisting Western reinterpretations of warfare, eucharist, and Christ’s death. In the early ninth century, the Carolingian theologians shifted the meaning of the eucharist from a celebration of the sanctifying powers found in Jesus’ incarnate and resurrected life to a focus on his tortured death.² Later in 1095, Pope Urban II transmuted warrior bloodletting from unequivocal sin to devotional act. In calling warriors to carry out the First Crusade, he made the killing of Christ’s enemies a holy act which can free a sinner from all penance for sin. Within this context of knightly violence and shifting Eucharistic interpretation, *the giving of death became the means by which a person enters into life.*³ In 1098, St. Anselm provided a new theological model

¹ Quoted in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 272.

² For the Franks’ change in the theological meaning of the Eucharist and the colonizing use of Christianity, see *ibid.*, Ch. 9, “The Expulsion of Paradise”.

³ On Pope Urban II and his call for the First Crusade, see *ibid.*, Ch. 10, “Peace by the Blood of the Cross,” esp. pp. 262-5. Bernard, asked by the Pope to preach widely in support of the Second Crusade in 1146, coined the phrase *malecide* (killing an evildoer) to replace *homicide* (killing a human being) to reflect the new interpretation of crusading violence as a sign of love and devotion to God rather than a spurning God’s

of the salvation story which could incorporate such changes in ritual meaning and ethics. In order to compensate for the insolent vandalism of creation, Jesus offers to God the gift of his death, a self-offering on the cross which pleased God and earned a reward sufficient to pay all of humanity's debt. Through this gift of death, the divine-human fellowship was restored.

Abelard's Suffering Christ and the God of Love

Like the Eastern Christians, Peter Abelard rejected Anselm's atonement theology as unethical. Abelard perceived the divine as a God of love and clemency, a merciful father rather than a stern lord of judgment and punishment. Further, God's love is everlastingly complete and generous, even for sinful humanity. The problem is not sin's accumulated debt, but its hardening effect upon the human heart.

God saves by moving the human heart from fear to love, and the death of Jesus makes this change of heart possible. Jesus proves the extent of his, and of God's, love for humanity *by his willingness to endure anything on humanity's behalf*, including his suffering and death. Salvation occurs when human compassion and contrition before the flogged Christ move the sinner from self-love to a pure, selfless love.

Can Abelard guide us today to a nonviolent theory of atonement? In *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*, Anthony Bartlett answers Yes, arguing for a nonviolent, neo-Abelardian model rooted in Rene Girard's theories of sacrifice and mimetic violence.⁴ In sharp contrast, in *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, Rita Nakashima Brock and

law. See *ibid.*, p. 285.

⁴ Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2001.

Rebecca Parker identify Abelard as even more problematic than Anselm in wedding notions of salvation with violence.

I find both sets of arguments to be flawed. Brock and Parker are right that Abelard and Bartlett are more dangerous than even Anselm. Like Abelard, Bartlett unwittingly fuses salvation with violence because his theory depends upon a male view of sin and salvation. His book exhibits no cognizance of feminist theory or theology. Nevertheless, Bartlett's theory also has insights that are necessary for a nonviolent theory of atonement.

Abyssal Compassion and the Death of Christ

In Anselm's theory of atonement, Anthony Bartlett sees the story of the exchange of a violent death upon a surrogate for the reconciliation of alienated factions, a story of exchange repeated in the religious ritual of the mass and the symbol of the cross. Redemption is gained through violence.⁵

For his neo-Abelardian model, Bartlett flips this Anselmian theory on its head; for Jesus effects not the solidification of the principle of compensatory exchange, but rather its forfeiture.⁶ The key moment at which the entrenched social patterns of scapegoating and retaliatory violence are overturned is that of Jesus' last torturous hours, a moment in which two contingent events of compassion occur.

⁵ On Bartlett's identification of mimetic exchange as the crucial vehicle of thought and the theological grounding for Christian praxis of violence, see *ibid.*, pp. 62-3; for its use throughout early and medieval church history in Ch. 2, "Imitatio Diaboli." For his discussion of Anselm's incorporation of mimetic exchange and resulting metaphysical establishment of divine violence in his concept of "satisfaction," see pp. 76-86.

⁶ In contrast to Anselm's atonement theory, Bartlett approvingly asserts that Abelard turned the framework of conflictual mimesis for understanding the salvific meaning of the cross "upside down" (p. 88). And as he says later about his model, the "moral influence" theory comes forward (223). On Jesus' act as a forfeiture of all exchange mechanisms, see p. 87.

First, Jesus responds to his torturers with abyssal compassion—a refusal to reduce the violent perpetrators to the status of the less-than-human. As in the moment of his arrest when he tells Peter to put down his sword, then kneels to repair the severed ear of the soldier holding a blade toward him, Jesus has compassion even for those who display only the will-to-power. His compassion here takes the form of *a forfeiture of violence*. For Jesus, violence itself is an outrage.⁷ Further, at the spiritual and relational level, Jesus does not seek revenge; indeed, he exhibits care. When Jesus breathes his last breath without asking God to avenge him—“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”—he loves his enemies and refuses to participate in all patterns of violent exchange.⁸ By receiving the violence without calling for retaliation, Jesus absorbs and dissipates it⁹ and allows a nonviolent direction to emerge in human history.¹⁰

Such endless non-retaliation powerfully evokes a second, corresponding act of compassion.¹¹ Through his love despite his suffering, Jesus reveals his lack of guilt for

⁷ On his compassion entailing a forfeiture of violence, see for example *ibid.*, pp. 4, 159, 183. For Jesus repairing the Temple soldier’s ear, see *Luke 21:47-54*.

⁸ *Luke 23:34*. On Jesus refusing to ask God to avenge his murder, see *ibid.*, p. 260. On Jesus’ renunciation of vengeance and instead offering forgiveness without measure to perpetrators, see pp. 39, 131, 153-4, 159, 169, 219. On Jesus renouncing revenge despite his feelings of divine abandonment and experiences of human abandonment, see p. 166. Jesus not only asks God not to take vengeance as he dies; when he returns alive after the resurrection, he does not seek revenge on his murderers. See 153-5.

⁹ In the limitlessness of non-retaliation, violence fails to win (*ibid.*, p. 169). “The infinite subjective forgiveness by the victim” resolves the “others’ violence in the victim” (251).

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 41, 138, and 240 respectively. The Crucified interrupts chronological time and initiates “the an-archival future” (240). In the cross, “the categorically new emerges” (41), “an immense novelty” (25): redemptive compassion and forgiveness in human affairs. Jesus effects “an absolute novelty of human selfhood” (18), thus changing the abyss of human abandonment and violence from within such an event, and causing redemption to arise in that moment. His death is thus “the real crossroads in human life” (152), where the new choice emerges to repeat his abyssal compassion.

¹¹ On the saving transformation of human existence entailing not merely Christ’s act of compassion—his death on the cross—but also the opening of the human mind, heart and will in compassion to the man Jesus in his full subjectivity, see pp. 25, 86-88, and 158-9. On the cross evoking love and hope in fellow victims of violence through Jesus’ solidarity with them, see p. 221. On the perpetrator’s experience of unconditional love, infinite non-violence, non-retaliation and forgiveness opening the possibility for a corresponding response of love, see pp. 39, 221. It is not merely the forgiveness, love, nonviolence and nonretaliation which evoke compassion, but these things *as Jesus suffers* that evoke it. See Bartlett’s discussion of the “aesthetic of Christ the man of Sorrows” for Christ’s dimension of beauty as sorrow, and its captivating power (176-8). Bartlett quotes Oscar Wilde: “He does not really teach one anything, but by being brought into his presence one becomes something” (176-7). Describing an encounter with the abyssal

the violence in the community. Jesus is innocent.¹² The witnesses at Golgotha notice not only society's patterns of vengeance, but that Jesus acts differently. The possibility is then opened that they may take their place in solidarity with the non-retaliatory victim, and repeat his nonviolent response to violence. Historically, Jesus' act opened up a new form of community devoted to Christ and determined to counter an endless pattern of hostile desire with a chain of forgiving love, and that chain's very different social world.¹³

Embracing Paradise: The Powers of Life within a Community of Ethical Grace

Anthony Bartlett's neo-Abelardian use of Girard attempts to separate love from violence. According to Rita Brock and Rebecca Parker, it has the opposite effect.

love of Christ, who "took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom," Bartlett writes: "The Man of Sorrows can transfigure pain into beauty, and in such a way that promises a pathway beyond pain into liberation" (177). "An aesthetic of Christ, on the contrary, is led to the point where everything is lost, and it is on this basis that reality may be transformed, that something new may occur" (182). "[I]t is the very suffering of the victim, engineered by the sacred but responded to with infinite nonviolence (without sin), that is the nuclear point at which the cosmos finds re-creation" (203).¹² The vindication of the scapegoat, who is the object of collective violence, opens a possible "salvific moment" in which the sacred order built upon violence may be deconstructed for the witnesses. See pp. 37-41, 86-8, and 134-8. The progression of biblical narratives moves toward the precise disclosure of the innocence of the victim, and the social violence, greed, and vengeance funding human culture, through the witness of the prophets and the uplifting of the innocence of Abel, Joseph, Job, Isaiah's Suffering Servant, and Jesus. From this collection of biblical narratives comes the Western history of concern for the victims of civilization's onslaught, rather than the "super-men" who have always been cultures' heroes. On Girard and Bartlett's interpretation of the biblical narrative giving a unique identification with the innocent victim, and its attending "apocalyptic vision" of cultural violence—disguised as sacred—leading toward universal death, see *ibid.*, pp. 28, 38-41, and 134-8. Bartlett quotes Bonhoeffer on the transformative power of the cross: "There remains an experience of incomparable value, that we have learned to see the great events of world history for once from below, from the perspective of those who are excluded, suspected, maltreated, powerless, oppressed, and scorned, in short the sufferers" (261).

¹³ On the contingent human act of compassion in face of the cross and constituting an entirely new way of human community, see *ibid.*, pp. 141-2, 153-9, 165-6, 221, and 254-5. On the effectiveness of Jesus' saving act dependent upon the response of the human witnesses and their creation of a new form of community rooted in abyssal compassion, see pp. 88, 170-71, and 219-222. Bartlett says that the new Christian community of non-retaliatory response lasted for over three centuries, and became a minority tradition throughout the continuing church history; see p. 220. For a Girardian model similar to Bartlett's, see S. Mark Heim, *Saved From Sacrifice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); and in Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), Ch. 14.

Bartlett, like Abelard before him, defines sin and love according to typically male perspectives. Sin is self-centeredness. With this view of sin as the framework, love acquires its virtue in the refusal to think of the self and limitless persistence in thinking only of the ‘other(s).’ True love dies.¹⁴

Abelard and Bartlett define love as an internalized condition of the heart of an isolated lover or hero, apart from the give-and-take found in webs of relationships. For them, a loving heart’s ability to effect change is found in its disclosive and absorbing powers. True *agape* only gives, without needing anything from the beloved. Thus, *one proves one’s love for another by one’s willingness to endure anything for the other’s sake*. Further, employing Girard’s theory, Bartlett argues that self-sacrificing, suffering love has power to change the pattern of mimetic exchange *by absorbing the violence of the perpetrator*. The isolated lover or hero does not stand in bitter defiance to such unjust violation of the self, but rather in “fathomless yielding.” The violation goes no further, stopping in the dead body of the non-retaliatory victim.¹⁵

Such a form of love does nothing to alter structures of imbalanced power and abuse, while upholding suffering as virtuous in a way which undercuts the move of victims to leave abusive relationships. For Brock and Parker, selfless suffering is neither loving nor salvific.

¹⁴ On sin as self-centeredness, see Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and The Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2001), pp. 32-4; and Brock in Marit Trelstad, ed., *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 248.. On love as selflessness, self-sacrifice and *agape*, see *Saving Paradise*, op. cit., pp. 52, 279, 302.

¹⁵ On a person proving her or his love through a willingness to endure pain or death, see *Saving Paradise*, pp. 284, 293-5. On love absorbing violence, thus ending a furtherance of the cycle of violence, see pp. 296-7. Brock and Parker quote Bartlett on this (p. 492, note 51), and also Miroslav Volf (p. 437, note 40), who writes: “By suffering violence as an innocent victim, [Jesus] took upon himself the aggression of the persecutors. He broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it. . . . the sacralizing of him as victim subverts violence” [quoted from *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 291-2].

Instead of locating saving power in a moment of torturous death, Brock and Parker locate it in experiences of new energies for living. A victim's suffering and fathomless yielding do not save. Rather, actions save, the exercise of human powers and responsibility rooted in wise discernment of what supports the great cycles of life that sustain human existence, and what destroys them. This powerful agency which opposes scapegoating and mimetic violence is directed by an alternate ethic of life which goes beyond a mere love which does not retaliate. The love which saves is the love which embraces this world passionately—the life of the self, of others, and of the earth. Salvation occurs when humans rise up and claim the reinstatement of the image of God effected in Christ, claiming freedom in whole-bodied, passionate life, and self-possessed power. In other words, salvation happens when humans respond to the demonic use of force with a fullness of the self, not with the self's negation.¹⁶

Jesus forms new communities shaped by loving action, in which love is defined socially as the sharing of vulnerability and the using of one's power to help others.¹⁷ The members must be ready to resist forces that want to keep certain persons and groups disempowered. Such communities of life are never helped by abyssal self-sacrifice or romanticizing victims. Rather, they are helped by non-violent *resistance* to the coercive forces of empire (not a bare non-violent response). Loving persons act to get victims out of violating relationships, to heal victims, and to change the structures of imbalanced

¹⁶ Brock and Parker term the alternate ethic of life "ethical grace." We are called to sustain life on earth ("ethical"), a call grounded in our experiences of the core goodness of life on earth (the world's web of life-giving relations which are "gracious"). On humans acting according to ethical grace as restoring paradise, see pp. xviii, xxii, 25, 28-31, 66, 106-7, 158, 175-6, 250. Salvation occurs when humans rise up to claim participation in the powers of life and divinization of humanity reestablished by Christ; see pp. xix, 14-15, 89, 106-7, 146, 191-202, 395-6. Such loving moral agency demands not only wisdom and power, but also the virtues of self-control, physical stamina, emotional maturity, and mental focus (124-5).

¹⁷ Such a definition stands in contrast to Abelard's, Girard's, and Bartlett's definition of love as forgoing the rights of the self in limitless yielding to, and forgiveness of, acts of violation by the 'other.'

power which cause harm to victims.¹⁸ One who loves says “No” to violence against the self or others, or the negating of one’s rights to life. She or he demands justice—not punitive, but rather restitutionary.¹⁹

Such a portrait of love could not get farther from Bartlett’s abyssal compassion.

Divine Hospitality and the Cross of Christ

Both sets of arguments are flawed, yet each also contains key insights which fund a reconstruction of Abelard’s theory. My reconstruction contains four moves which draw upon Bartlett’s and Brock and Parker’s key insights, while avoiding their fatal flaws.

Bartlett is correct that *the basic structure of Abelard’s theory points toward a nonviolent atonement theory*. The basic structure of Abelard’s argument is this: Divine grace redeems by disclosing a human world of ‘ungrace’ built upon violence and complicity with violence, and by simultaneously offering an alternative basis for human community. The gracious act shatters human self-deceptions and enkindles the will to switch to a life based upon grace. Abelard rightly points to love as a form of power which can redeem by evoking within the beloved life-giving powers and a responding love.

However, while Bartlett uplifts the right structure for a neo-Abelardian theory of atonement, Brock and Parker provide the correct content, and not Bartlett or even

¹⁸ On compassion entailing not fathomless yielding and limitless forgiveness, but non-violent resistance to forces which violate, see *Saving Paradise*, pp. 26, 47, 158, 193, 191-202, 241, 299.

¹⁹ On the choice to live within the new community which is part of the renewed paradise which straddles the worlds of the living and the dead entailing a rejection of violence against the self in face of coercive powers and principalities, see *ibid.*, pp. 66, 80, 404-410; and *Proverbs*, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-42. The affirmation of life also entails the demand for restorative (or restitutionary) justice when perpetrators violate victims. The community holds the perpetrator accountable by demanding restitution, though in a non-violent manner. The community also prays for that person. See *Saving Paradise*, pp. 102, 181-6; and Brock in Trelstad, p. 250.

Abelard himself. Love is not the bare refusal to retaliate with coercive force. Rather, *both love and grace are collective terms, signifying communities in which life is embraced and fellow subjects share power equally and give aid reciprocally.*

Jesus enacts this love of life which discloses a world of ‘ungrace’ and evokes a healing and corresponding love in others primarily during his life. Jesus’ love doesn’t die, it *acts*: It brings wholeness through his physical healings and raising of the dead, his appreciation of beauty and his nonviolent challenge to coercive structures. His love acts to create a new community rooted in ethical grace, to breathe the power of the Holy Spirit upon this community, and to empower it further with gifts of baptism and eucharist. The miracle of the loaves and fishes accurately portrays the nature of the divine love which saves nonviolently, for it shows Jesus confronting empire not with an opposing coercion, nor with an abnegation of power. Jesus confronts the Roman structures of domination and submission by increasing a community built upon a different source of power, that of the Spirit of Life, and a different ethic, one that is hospitable and gracious.

While Brock and Parker are much stronger than Bartlett concerning the nature of saving compassion and its location in communities of life and Jesus’ acts of love, Bartlett’s second contribution is his insistence that *the cross is a saving moment*. Compassion as a form of power is one that depends upon the response of the recipient, and thus one that entails risk—not only of failure, but also of threats to one’s life. While Brock and Parker are correct that love entails the protection of one’s own life as well as the lives of others, sometimes the act of supporting another’s life puts oneself in the path of enemies. In a world built upon scapegoating, codes of retaliation against the ‘other,’ and structures of dominance and subordination, those who act compassionately also risk

their life. To step aside is to abandon the neighbor to the onslaught of such coercive forces, or to abandon one's integrity and the new community. To put it differently, sometimes there are no good choices in the fight to preserve life (as the struggles of Bonhoeffer, King, Jr., and Romero reveal).

One who loves life and repudiates mimetic violence must improvise, as Jesus did, protecting himself when he could—such as when he went to Caesarea Phillipi—but taking risks when he felt protecting his own life would endanger that of others or his integrity, such as when he went to Jerusalem or turned over the tables.²⁰

Jesus' suffering at Golgotha is not salvific, but his willingness to risk that suffering in the cause of life is. Jesus' willingness to risk his life because of his love of others, his love of his own life's integrity, his love of the God of life and of the new community of hospitality, is essential to the nature of love. When the witnesses perceive in Jesus a love which seeks the freedom of all—victims and perpetrators of violence—and a person who refuses to betray anyone, including himself and his own integrity, they perceive their own willingness to betray, and the bankruptcy of a communal life built upon such an ethos. This is why Abelard, Girard, and Bartlett are correct in perceiving the moment of the cross as saving. Jesus' refusal either to abandon the victims of Roman Empire, or curse his torturers, is a constituent part of his life-act as compassion.²¹

Finally, if the revelation of truth which transforms the hearts of those who encounter Jesus is the revelation of general and universally-accessible truth, then neither

²⁰ On Herod's execution of John the Baptist, see *Mark 6:14-29* and *Mt. 14:1-12*. On Jesus moving just with his disciples soon after to Caesarea Phillipi, see *Mark 8:27-33* and *Mt. 16:13-23*. Instead of staying in Caesarea Phillipi indefinitely, he turned his face to Jerusalem: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (*Mt. 16:21*).

²¹ Surprisingly, in their arguments that martyrs like Perpetua hold to faithfulness to the new paradisaal community against temptations to apostasy while under trial, Brock and Parker make the same point. See Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, pp. 65-71, 78, 80, 97, 120-21, and esp. 165-7, 179, 200-202.

the cross, nor even the life of Jesus, are necessary for such a disclosure. In emphasizing that Jesus is just one avenue through which the Spirit of life works to create new communities of ethical grace, Brock and Parker signal just such a non-essentiality.

However, *if what is revealed in Jesus' life-act is not only the general character of God as compassionate, but also a new act by God in Jesus to effect an ontological change in the human situation and the God-world relation, then Jesus' life-act—including his death—has a different disclosive character and power.* Abelard was ambiguous on this, which is why subsequent critics wondered if his atonement theory was merely “subjective.” The love disclosed in Jesus' suffering is God's constant love for the world, and yet there is something new in this particular, gospel form of God undergoing suffering for love's sake. Something astounding and counter-intuitive occurs through Jesus' life, death and days in a tomb: Suffering and even death are brought into the inner-life of God. Similarly, if the cross becomes an act not only of homicide but of deicide, if Jesus is conceived as God in the flesh, then the cross itself contains some kind of ontological change which is particular to that historical moment, and which has disclosive and world-altering force.²²

Girard and Bartlett hint at this by describing Jesus' abyssal compassion at his death as bringing a contingent, yet epoch-changing, introduction of a unique and novel way of being human, one which can then be imitated in the new community. Under the

²² From Luther to today, “theologians of the cross” describe an ontological change occurring at the cross at progressively significant levels. As a result of God's kenotic movement, God takes into God's own life and history finitude and suffering (Barth, Hall), relational rupture and loss (Moltmann), the annihilating power of nothingness and death (Jüngel). For a discussion of this progressive movement, see Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Barth sees the death of Jesus as an act of universal human suicide, fratricide, and deicide. See for example *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), pp. 397-99. Combining neo-Abelardian models with reconfigured models of *Christus Victor*, sacrifice and satisfaction also integrates into the former the necessary element of ‘ontological change.’

conditions of finitude and flesh, God in Jesus introduces into creaturely history a sinless form of human love which seeks the empowerment of all living things and which will not falter into betrayal.

When this element of ontological change is brought inside the Abelardian structure of love as a power, the Abelardian theory conveys a nonviolent atonement, and separates the Carolingian's marriage of imperial violence, self-sacrificing devotion, and divine salvation.